

Children and young people's reading in 2019

Findings from our Annual Literacy Survey

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We first began asking children and young people about their reading habits in 2005. Acknowledging the importance of yearly trend data, we established our Annual Literacy Survey in 2010, which tracks UK children and young people's reading and writing enjoyment, attitudes and behaviours year-on-year.

56,906 children and young people aged 9 to 18 in the UK participated in our survey between January and March 2019. For the first time we also had information from 3,748 children aged 5 to 8 who completed a similar survey designed for younger children.

Data from 2019 reveal an increasingly stark picture of children and young people's reading habits. Compared with the year before, fewer enjoy reading and fewer say that they read daily in their free time. At the same time, attitudes towards reading have remained unchanged. The link between reading engagement and skill is also clear.

Some of the key findings for 2019 include:

Reading enjoyment

- 53% of children and young people said they enjoy reading in 2019
- Children and young people's levels of reading enjoyment continue to decrease: children's reading enjoyment decreased between 2016 and 2017/18 – the first decrease in six years. This decline continued in 2019 and we are now back at a level last evidenced in 2013
- Children and young people's levels of reading enjoyment are at their lowest since 2013: 53% of children say they enjoy reading in 2019 vs 53.3% in 2013

Daily reading frequency

- 25.8% of children and young people said they read daily in 2019

- Children and young people’s daily reading levels are the lowest we’ve ever recorded: just 25.8% of children say they read daily in their free time in 2019; this is the lowest level we have recorded since we first surveyed children in 2005

Reading attitudes

- Attitudes towards reading have remained stable over the past couple of years
- 52.3% of children and young people would be happy to get a book as a present
- 40.7% of children and young people think reading is cool
- 34% of children and young people cannot find things to read that interest them

Reading skills

We had reading skills data for 712 pupils aged 11 to 14

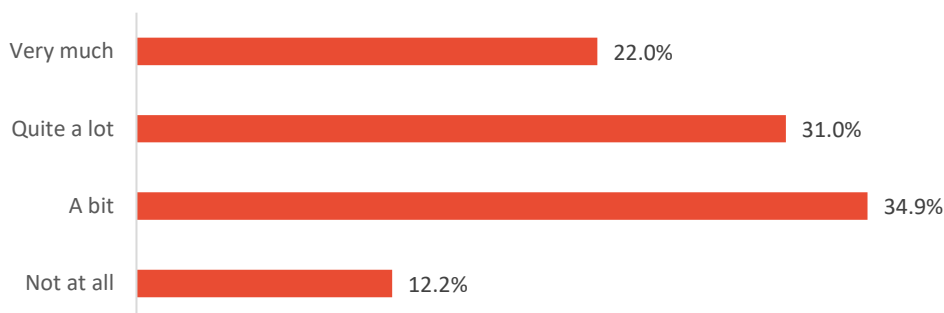
- Children and young people who enjoy reading are three times more likely to read above the level expected for their age than children who don’t enjoy reading (30.1% vs 8.1%)
- Children who read daily in their free time are twice as likely to read above the level expected for their age than children who don’t read daily (37.6% vs 14.2%)

Levels of reading enjoyment continue to decline

Raising levels of reading enjoyment across the UK is a central part of our programme and policy work. Our annual survey therefore contains a question that assesses how much children and young people enjoy reading.

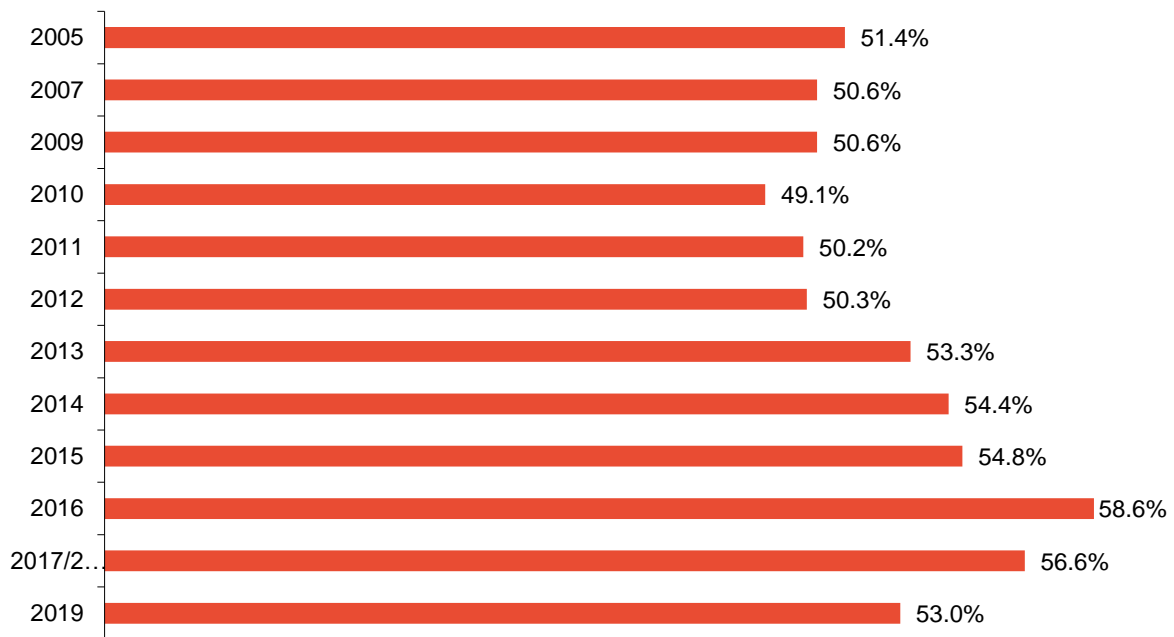
Our data from 2019 show that 1 in 5 children or young people enjoyed reading very much, while 3 in 10 enjoyed reading quite a lot (see Figure 1). This means that just over half said that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot; a combination of responses that we use to compare trends over time (see below). 1 in 8 children and young people said that they don’t enjoy reading at all, which is higher than the 1 in 10 we evidenced the previous year.

Figure 1: Levels of reading enjoyment in 2019



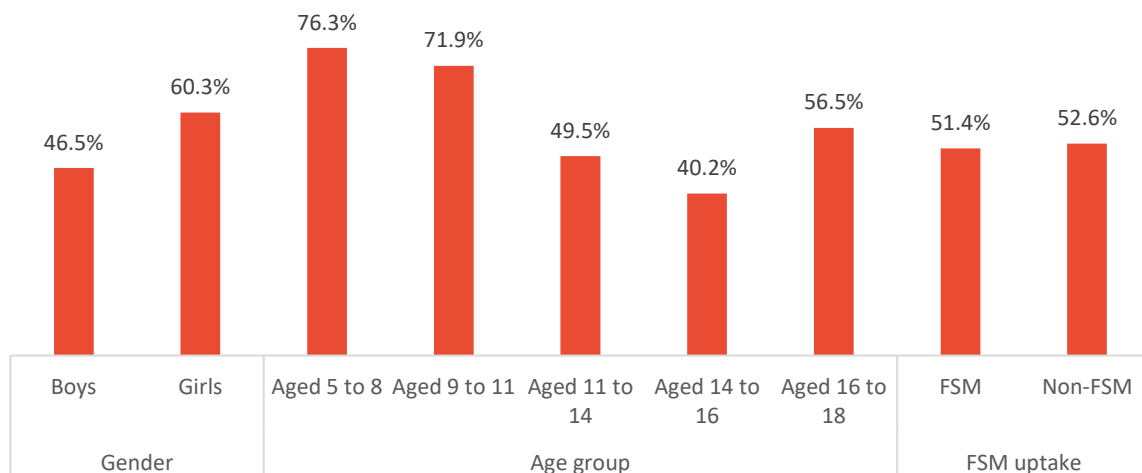
As can be seen in Figure 2, children and young people’s levels of reading enjoyment decreased between 2016 and 2017/18, the first decrease in six years. This decline continued in 2019 and we are now back at a level we last evidenced in 2013.

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people who enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot from 2005 to 2019



Who enjoyed reading in 2019? Figure 3 shows that more girls than boys said that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot. It also highlights the gradual decline of reading enjoyment with age, with nearly twice as many children aged 5 to 8 as those aged 14 to 16 saying that they enjoy reading. However, enjoyment levels recover for the older group surveyed, with nearly 3 in 5 16 to 18-year-olds saying that they enjoy reading, compared with only 2 in 5 14 to 16-year-olds.

Figure 3: Enjoying reading either very much or quite a lot in 2019 by gender, age group and free school meal uptake



In 2016, we reported that the enjoyment gap between those who receive free school meals (FSM) and those who don't closed in 2016, with an identical percentage of FSM and non-FSM

pupils saying that they enjoy reading. The following year, that gap had opened again, with more non-FSM than FSM pupils saying that they enjoy reading. And 2019 is no different, with slightly more pupils who don't receive free schools meals saying that they enjoy reading than their peers who receive free school meals.

Figure 4 highlights the difference in percentage points between reading enjoyment levels in 2019 and the previous year. It shows that there was a particular decline in enjoyment levels in boys, those aged 9 to 11, and those from non-free-school-meal backgrounds.

Figure 4: Percentage point difference in reading enjoyment levels between 2017/18 and 2019 by gender, age group and free school meal uptake

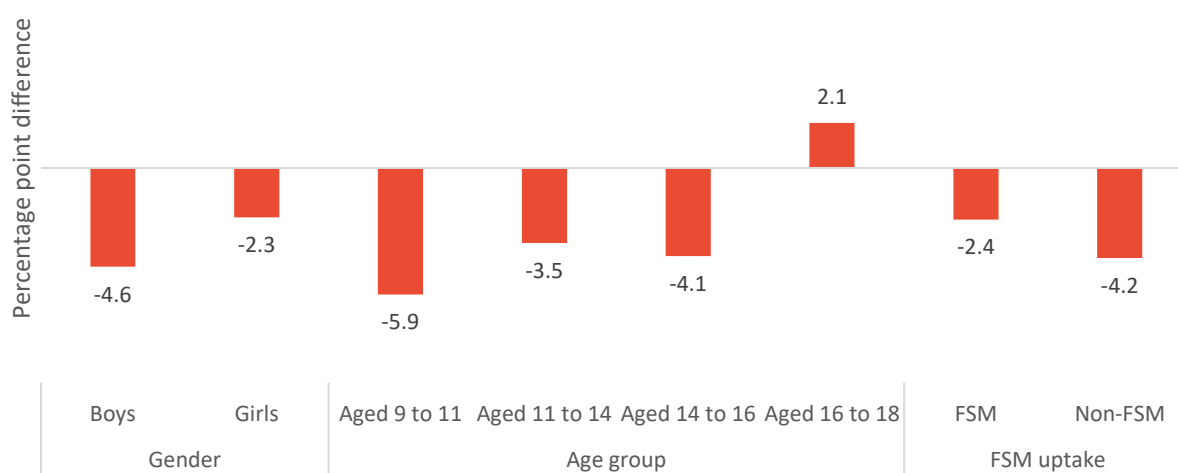


Table 1 shows levels of reading enjoyment by demographic background over time between 2005 and 2019. As a result, the gender gap has widened in 2019, while the gap by free school meal uptake has narrowed again.

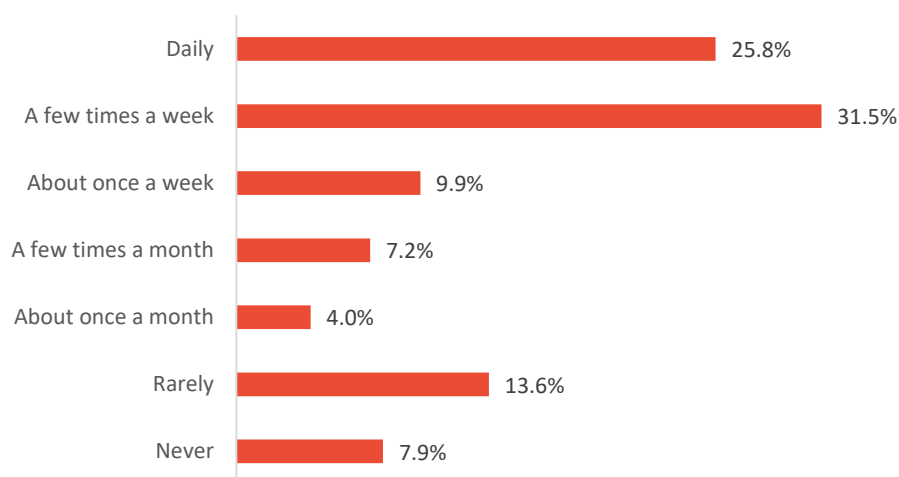
Table 1: Enjoying reading either very much or quite a lot by demographic breakdown between 2005 and 2019

	Boys	Girls	Aged 8 to 11	Aged 11 to 14	Aged 14 to 16	FSM	Non-FSM
2005	46.1%	56.8%	67.5%	44.3%	32.0%	46.5%	50.2%
2010	42.3%	55.4%	68.1%	45.8%	32.5%	44.1%	49.7%
2011	43.7%	56.7%	73.0%	47.2%	34.4%	45.3%	50.8%
2012	43.9%	56.8%	64.0%	45.5%	36.3%	47.7%	50.7%
2013	47.1%	59.8%	65.8%	49.5%	36.7%	49.6%	53.9%
2014	47.2%	61.6%	65.6%	50.3%	43.4%	50.4%	54.9%
2015	47.8%	61.2%	72.6%	51.7%	40.2%	53.4%	55.1%
2016	52.4%	64.9%	77.6%	55.2%	43.8%	58.3%	58.3%
2017/18	51.1%	62.6%	77.0%	53.1%	44.3%	53.8%	56.3%
2019	46.5%	60.3%	71.9%	49.5%	40.2%	51.4%	52.6%

Levels of daily reading continue to decline sharply and are now at the lowest level

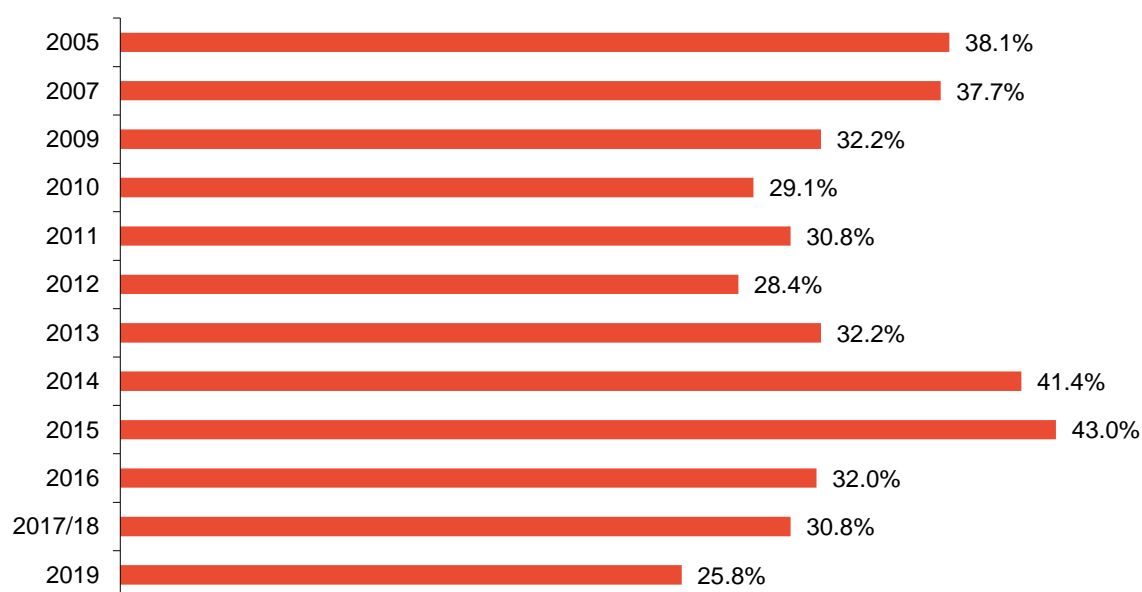
In 2019, only 1 in 4 children and young people said that they read something in their free time every day (see Figure 5). A further 3 in 10 said that they read something a few times a week. However, 1 in 7 rarely read in their free time, and 1 in 13 said that they never read.

Figure 5: Levels of frequency with which children and young people read outside class in 2019



The percentage of children and young people who say that they read outside class on a daily basis has continued to decline over the past year (Figure 6), dropping sharply by 5 percentage points from 30.8% in 2017/18 to 25.8% in 2019. This means that in 2019 we recorded the lowest daily reading rate since we started asking the question in 2005.

Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people who read daily outside class from 2005 to 2019



Who reads daily outside class in 2019? As can be seen in Figure 7, more girls than boys said that they read daily outside class. The graph also highlights the steady decline in daily reading levels by age, with nearly three times as many 5 to 8-year-olds saying that they read daily in their free time compared with those aged 14 to 16. Indeed, only 1 in 6 young people aged 14 to 16 say that they read daily in their free time, a percentage that increases slightly to 1 in 5 for those aged 16 to 18. In 2019, there was no difference in daily reading rates between those who receive free school meals and those who don't.

Figure 7: Percentage of children and young people who read daily outside class in 2019 by gender, age group and free school meal uptake

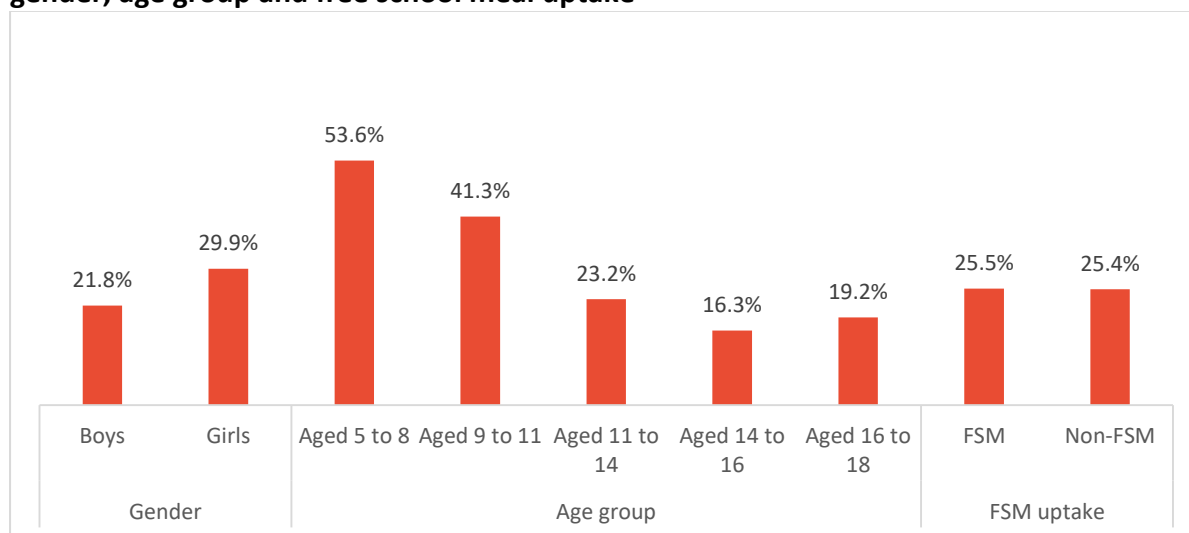


Figure 8 outlines the difference in percentage points between daily reading levels in 2019 and the previous year. It shows that the decline for boys and girls was equal but that young people in our oldest age range declined the most. It is also interesting to note that pupils who don't receive free school meals showed a bigger decline over the previous year compared with their peers who receive free school means, which, in turn, means that the gap between the groups closed in 2019.

Figure 8: Percentage point difference in daily reading levels between 2017/18 and 2019 by gender, age group and free school meal uptake

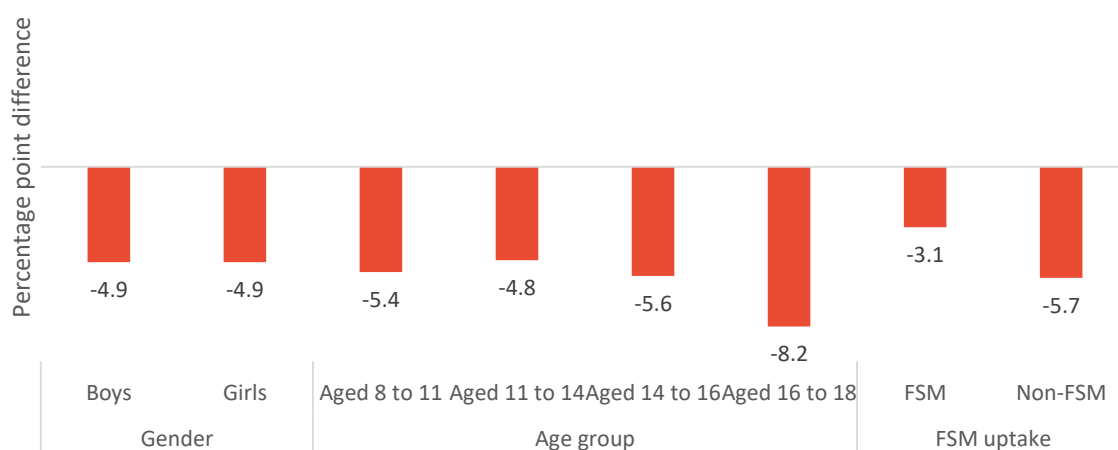


Table 2 outlines the over-time percentage of children and young people who read daily outside class broken down by gender, age group and free school meal uptake.

Table 2: Percentage of children and young people who read daily in their free time by demographic breakdown between 2005 and 2019

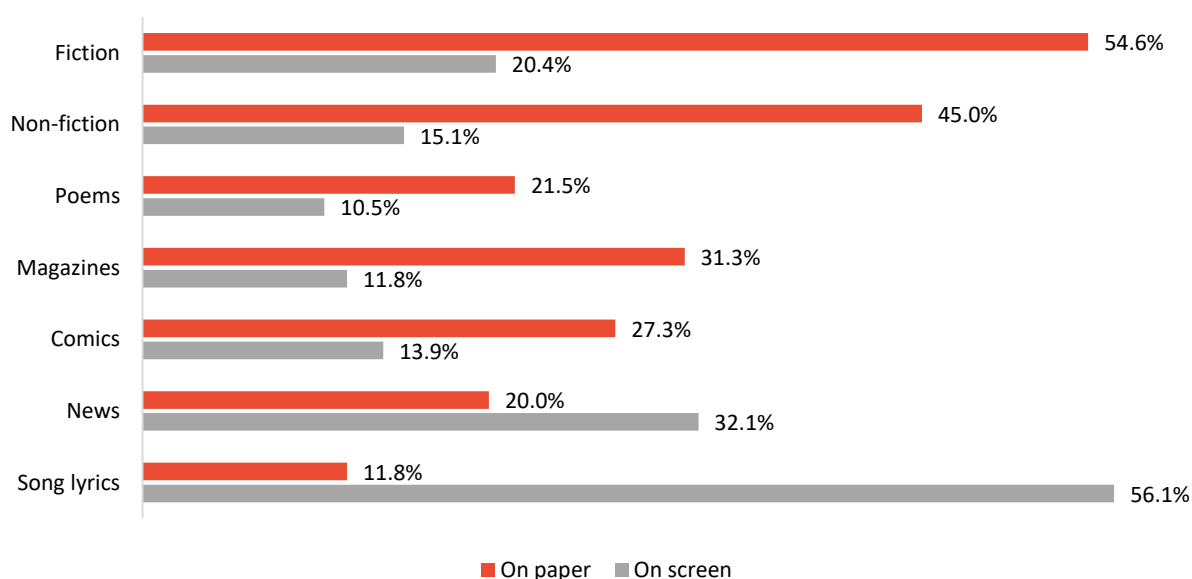
	Boys	Girls	Aged 8 to 11	Aged 11 to 14	Aged 14 to 16	FSM	Non-FSM
2005	35.0%	42.0%	40.5%	25.8%	21.4%	31.0%	39.0%
2010	24.1%	33.8%	40.9%	26.7%	21.7%	22.9%	30.2%
2011	26.3%	35.3%	42.9%	29.0%	22.9%	28.6%	31.2%
2012	24.3%	32.5%	37.6%	24.5%	20.3%	24.9%	29.0%
2013	28.2%	36.6%	40.7%	28.4%	24.6%	28.7%	32.8%
2014	35.8%	46.5%	45.9%	38.5%	38.2%	36.5%	42.1%
2015	36.0%	49.5%	45.5%	42.0%	42.4%	38.2%	44.0%
2016	27.5%	36.5%	46.3%	28.9%	22.6%	28.8%	32.0%
2017/18	26.7%	34.8%	46.7%	28.0%	21.9%	28.6%	31.1%
2019	21.8%	29.9%	41.3%	23.2%	16.3%	25.5%	25.4%

Print formats dominate children and young people’s reading in 2019

In 2017/18 we changed the way we ask children and young people about the formats they read in their free time, which means that we will not be able to look at trends in this respect. However, we will now be able to track over time how many children read various formats either in print or digitally.

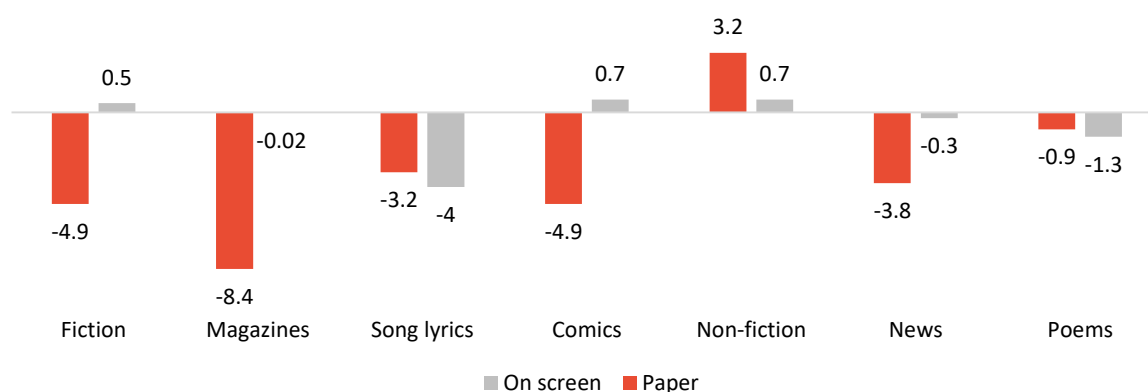
In 2019 we asked children and young people to indicate whether they read seven formats either in print or digitally. As can be seen in Figure 9, print is the dominant format for most children and young people’s reading in 2019. More children and young people aged 9 to 18 say that they read fiction, non-fiction, comics, magazines and poems on paper than on screen. However, song lyrics and news were more likely to be read on screen than on paper.

Figure 9: Materials read either on screen or on paper outside school at least once a month in 2019 by children and young people aged 9 to 18



On average, children and young people aged 9 to 18 read 2.17 (SD = 1.31) materials on screen in their free time at least once a month in 2019, compared with 2.82 (SD = 1.49) materials in print. Notably, while the reading of most materials across both formats declined between 2017/18 and 2019, there was a small rise in the number of children and young people who read fiction, non-fiction and comics digitally compared with the year before (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Percentage point change in materials read outside class at least once a month between 2017/18 and 2019 by children and young people aged 9 to 18



We also asked about six formats that can only be read on screen. As can be seen in Figure 11, most children and young people said that they read text messages in their free time, followed by instant messages and websites.

Figure 11: Percentage of children and young people who read a variety of online formats outside class at least once a month in 2019

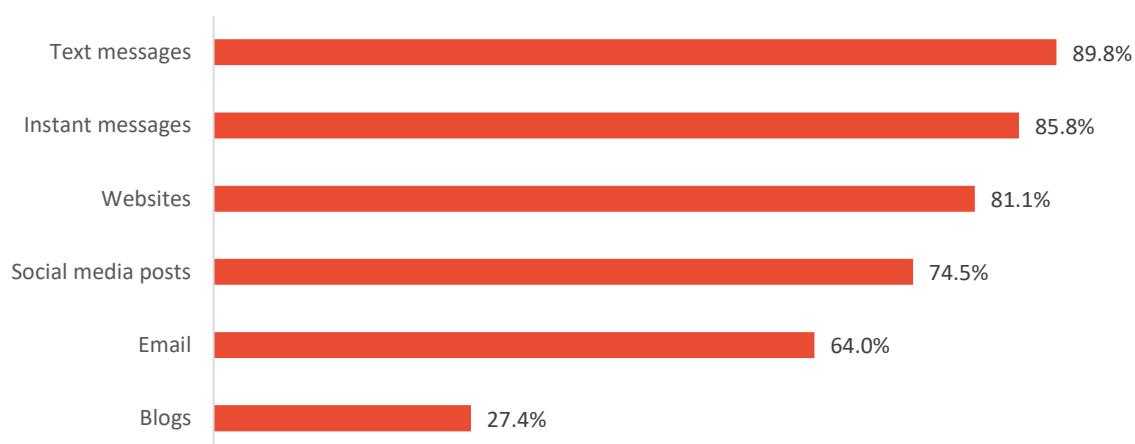
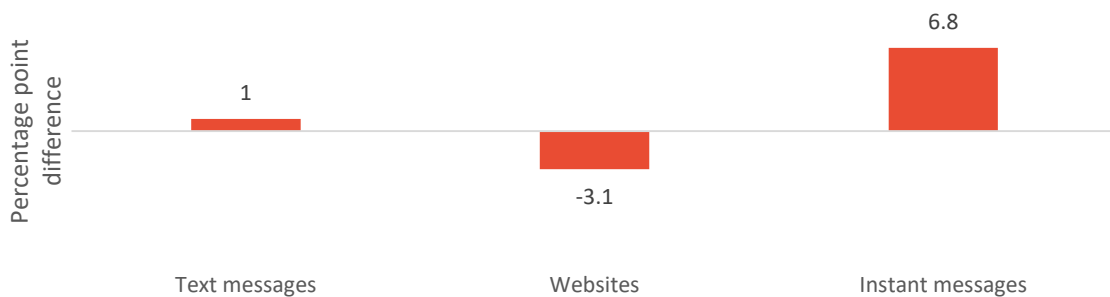


Figure 12 shows that there has been increase in the percentage of children and young people who read instant messages over the previous year, while the percentage of children and young people who read websites has dropped slightly.

Figure 12: Percentage point change in online formats being read outside class at least once a month between 2017/18 and 2019 by children and young people aged 9 to 18



For demographic information, please see our detailed report on this topic: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-young-people-and-digital-reading/>

Reading attitudes have remained unchanged

We also asked children and young people whether they agree or disagree with several statements that explored their attitudes towards reading. Figure 13 shows that 3 in 5 agreed that there are lots of things they want to read, while over half indicate that they would persevere reading even when they struggle. Over half see a link between their reading skill and their ability to get a good job when they are older. However, only 2 in 5 agree that reading is cool, while 1 in 3 cannot find things to read that interest them and 3 in 10 read only because they have to. Half of children and young people also agreed that they would be happy to receive a book as a present.

Figure 13: Percentage agreement with reading attitude statements in 2019



Figure 14 shows that attitudes towards reading have largely remained unchanged compared with 2017/2018. However, there were two changes in how children and young people responded in 2019 compared with the year before: more children and young people agreed that there are lots of things they want to read. However, fewer agreed that they will persevere with reading even when they find it difficult.

Figure 14: Percentage point change in reading attitudes statements between 2017/18 and 2019



Table 3 compares the percentage of children and young people who have agreed with four attitudinal statements about reading since 2013. It shows that, with the exception of responses in 2016, attitudes towards reading have remained relatively stable.

Table 3: Percentage agreement with four attitudinal statements about reading between 2013 and 2019

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017/18	2019
I only read when I have to	28.5%	27.6%	27.9%	34.0%	30.6%	30.8%
Reading is cool	39.0%	40.2%	42.4%	48.4%	41.1%	40.7%
I cannot find things to read that interest me	31.6%	30.3%	30.8%	36.7%	33.7%	34.0%
If I am a good reader I will get a better job when I grow up	56.3%	54.0%	54.6%	60.4%	55.6%	55.1%

Table 4 outlines the percentage of children and young people who have agreed with all attitudinal statements asked in 2019 broken down by demographic background.

Table 4: Percentage agreement with attitudinal statements in 2019 by gender, age group and free school meal uptake

	Boys	Girls	Aged 8 to 11	Aged 11 to 14	Aged 14 to 16	Aged 16 to 18	FSM	Non-FSM
If I am a good reader, I will get a better job when I grow up	54.6%	56.5%	65.7%	55.1%	41.8%	44.9%	57.9%	54.4%
There are lots of things I want to read	60.8%	66.0%	74.7%	61.6%	52.9%	56.3%	64.5%	62.8%
I cannot find things to read that interest me	36.1%	31.3%	27.6%	35.2%	39.9%	24.0%	38.7%	33.1%
I only read when I have to	35.2%	25.8%	28.0%	30.3%	38.0%	25.5%	36.1%	29.7%
I continue reading even when I find it difficult	65.5%	68.4%	77.8%	65.2%	57.2%	58.3%	66.8%	66.5%
Reading is cool	35.2%	46.8%	66.8%	35.1%	27.2%	45.0%	45.0%	38.8%
I would be happy to get a book as a present	44.3%	61.2%	70.3%	49.3%	39.1%	57.5%	49.6%	52.3%

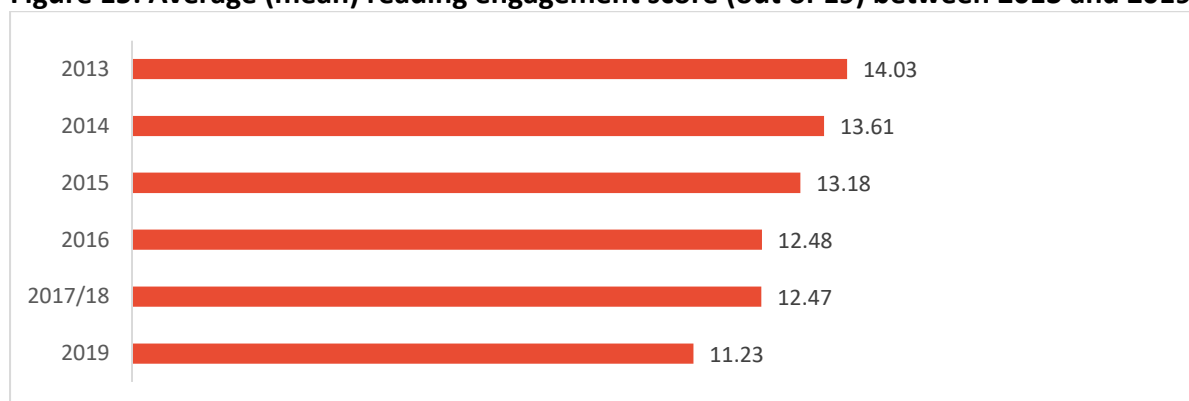
Reading engagement

So far, we have looked at the trends over time for reading enjoyment and daily reading. In addition to this, we thought it might be interesting to explore how children and young people’s engagement with reading as a whole has changed over time.

To this end, we constructed a variable that summed the responses across several reading variables that we have been asked since 2014, with positive responses being allocated higher scores (for a total of 19 scores). The components summed are reading enjoyment (max score of 4), reading frequency (max score of 7) and four reading attitudes: ‘I only read when I have to’, ‘reading is cool’, ‘I cannot find things to read that interest me’ and ‘if I am a good reader then I will get a better job when I grow up’ (max score of 8).

Figure 15 looks at the average reading engagement scores since 2013 and shows that children and young people’s engagement has gradually been declining.

Figure 15: Average (mean) reading engagement score (out of 19) between 2013 and 2019



Link to reading skill

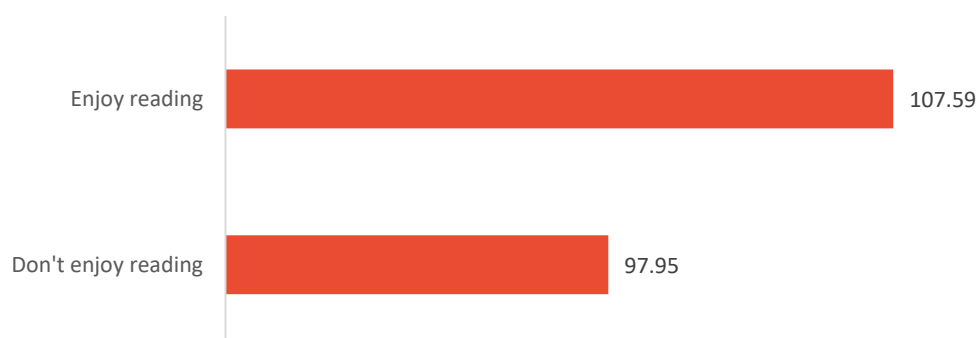
In 2019, we had reading skill data for 712 pupils aged 11 to 14, which allowed us to explore the link between reading enjoyment, reading frequency and reading skill. For this part of the study, we worked with schools who all used the same reading skill measure, namely Star Reading¹.

Star Reading provides standardised reading scores that take into account children's ages and are easily interpretable. Like most other educational skill tests, it is standardised so that the average score is 100, while the spread of scores (the standard deviation) is set for 15. This means that children who have standardised scores of 85-115 fall within the average reading skills band, while children who score below 85 have below average reading skills, and children who score above 115 have above average reading skills.

Our findings show that there is a positive relationship ($r = .417$, $p < 0.001$) between young people's overall reading score and their reading enjoyment, with those who report higher levels of reading enjoyment also scoring more highly in the reading test.

This association is also seen in the differences in reading enjoyment based on the overall reading score. As shown in Figure 16, young people who enjoyed reading ($N = 427$) had higher average reading scores than children who didn't enjoy reading ($N = 285$).

Figure 16: Average (mean) age-standardised reading score by whether or not young people aged 11 to 14 enjoy reading²



¹ <http://www.renlearn.co.uk/star-reading/>

² Enjoy SD = 15.46; don't enjoy SD = 12.58

To further compare pupils with different reading scores, we divided them into three groups based on their score: having a below average score (< 85), an average score (85 to 115) and an above average reading score (> 115). As can be seen in Table 5, twice as many young people who don't enjoy reading read below the average expected for their age compared with their peers who enjoy reading. Conversely, nearly four times as many young people who enjoy reading read above the expected level compared with their peers who don't enjoy reading.

Table 5: Reading skill by whether or not young people aged 11 to 14 enjoy reading

	Below expected level	At expected level	Above expected level
Enjoy reading	6.1%	63.8%	30.1%
Don't enjoy reading	15.1%	76.8%	8.1%

It is not only enjoyment that is linked to reading skill: so is reading frequency. Our findings show that there is also a positive, albeit weak, relationship ($r = .286$, $p < 0.001$) between young people's overall reading score and their reading frequency, suggesting that those who score more highly in the reading tests also report reading more frequently.

Indeed, as can be seen in Figure 17, young people who read daily (N = 213) had higher average reading scores than children who didn't read daily (N = 499).

Figure 17: Average (mean) age-standardised reading score by whether or not young people aged 11 to 14 read daily³



Again, looking at this differently, Table 6 shows that twice as many young people who don't read daily read below the average expected for their age compared with their peers who read daily. Conversely, nearly three times as many young people who read daily read above the expected level compared with their peers who don't read daily.

Table 6: Reading skill by whether or not young people aged 11 to 14 enjoy reading

	Below expected level	At expected level	Above expected level
Read daily	6.1%	56.3%	37.6%
Don't read daily	11.2%	74.5%	14.2%

³ Daily SD = 16.466; don't read daily SD = 13.61

To sum up

Children and young people's levels of reading enjoyment and daily reading continue to decline. We have seen a particularly stark decrease in daily reading, which is now at its lowest level since we started reporting it in 2005.

Reading enjoyment and frequency continue to be a concern, especially for particular groups of children and young people for whom we see the sharpest decreases in enjoyment and frequency over the last year. Reading enjoyment has particularly decreased for boys, children aged 9 to 11, and those who don't receive free school meals. Daily reading levels have fallen for young people aged 16 to 18 and those who don't receive free school meals.

While this decline is also reflected in children and young people's overall reading engagement, which has gradually fallen since 2013, attitudes towards reading have remained relatively stable in the past year. It is possible that the decline in levels of daily reading regardless of stable attitudes reflects the increasing pressures on children and young people's time. However, the decline in reading enjoyment while attitudes have remained stable is interesting as we would expect these to be closely related. We will be closely monitoring how these develop over the next year.

Our data also continue to demonstrate the relationship between children and young people's reading enjoyment, frequency and skill, increasing the concern over declining levels of enjoyment and frequency. This suggests that our programmes, campaigns and policy work on enjoyment and positive behaviours around reading are more crucial than ever.

Our sincere thanks to Slaughter and May for their generous financial contribution that enabled us to conduct this annual survey.

About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

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